

In his literary memoir of 1852, *Lions: Living and Dead*, John Ross Dix attributed the prodigious popularity of *The Mysteries of London* to the fact that the penny serial ‘ministered to the depraved appetites of the lower classes,’<sup>1</sup> while ‘murders, seductions, robberies, horrors of all sorts, spiced with the abuse of the upper orders, formed the staple of the story.’<sup>2</sup> Dix did acknowledge some skill on the part of the author, Mr. G.W.M. Reynolds, who wrote ‘like a steam engine,’<sup>3</sup> but concluded that ‘as a writer his works will not perpetuate his name, for none of them have a vitality sufficient to reserve them from the rubbish of the cheap and nasty school of literature.’<sup>4</sup> This final prophecy has largely been fulfilled. Reynolds doesn’t even make it into Malcolm Elwin’s *Victorian Wallflowers*.<sup>5</sup> Critically, Reynolds has always resided in an underworld of sorts, but, given the *mise-en-scene* of *The Mysteries of London*, ‘a labyrinth of dwellings whose very aspect appeared to speak of hideous poverty and fearful crime,’ where else could he be?<sup>6</sup>

The nineteenth century London underworld, that subterranean social space intimately connected with urban poverty and crime, has been usefully defined by Kellow Chesney as the realm of ‘certain classes of people whose very manner of living seemed a challenge to ordered society and the tissue of laws, moralities and taboos holding it together.’<sup>7</sup> In 1832 (a year after Reynolds sets the opening of *The Mysteries of London*), *Fraser’s Magazine* warned of a new and dangerous urban underclass, ‘a distinct body of thieves, whose life and business it is to follow up a determined warfare against the constituted authorities, by living in idleness and on plunder.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Ross Dix, *Lions: Living and Dead, or Personal Recollections of the Great and the Gifted* (London: Tweedie 1852), 284.

<sup>2</sup> Dix, 284.

<sup>3</sup> Dix, 282.

<sup>4</sup> Dix, 288.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Elwin, *Victorian Wallflowers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934). Elwin’s ‘unjustly neglected writers’ are: John Wilson (‘Christopher North’); William Maginn; R.H. Barham (‘Ingoldsby’); W.H. Ainsworth; John Forster; Wilkie Collins; Ellen Price (Mrs. Henry Wood); R.D. Blackmore and Marie Louise de la Ramée (‘Ouida’).

<sup>6</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* vol. I (London: George Vickers, 1846), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Kellow Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld* (London: Penguin, 1991), 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Fraser’s Magazine*, V (1832), 521 – 2.